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## **Abstract**

Good social work benefits the recipients of the social worker role, social workers themselves, their employing organisations and society more broadly. However, it is difficult to conduct consistently good social work when social workers have been shown to have chronically poor working conditions. This paper therefore outlines UK social worker working conditions and wellbeing from 2022, as well as comparing these results to surveys conducted in 2017 and 2018. We therefore report a series of cross-sectional surveys, in addition to open-ended questions, to collect data from 533 respondents in 2022, and compare these to findings from similar surveys in previous years. Results demonstrate that working conditions improved slightly between 2018 and 2022, although these conditions are still very poor compared with other occupations. Qualitative analyses suggest that workload, resources, lack of respect, and lack of consistent and good quality reflective supervision are significant issues for respondents. As such, we argue that policy makers and employers need to provide greater support for social worker working conditions and wellbeing, and that this support would likely negate current high levels of turnover and sickness absence. Additionally, however, for the first time in these surveys, poor pay also emerged as an issue needing attention.

## **Key Words**

Social work, working conditions, wellbeing, pay, longitudinal methods

## **Teaser Text**

It is well known that social workers love their jobs, but suffer from chronically poor working conditions characterised by high workloads and few resources. We are also seeing high levels of social workers leaving the role. In this paper we report the findings of a series of national surveys conducted with social workers between 2017 and 2022, in order to look at whether (and how) working conditions have changed across that time, and what social workers would like to see done to improve their working conditions. We found that working conditions continue to be very poor - worse than many other occupations in the UK. And these conditions are leading to social workers wanting to leave the job, as well as contributing to ongoing poor wellbeing. Therefore we suggest that policy makers and employers alike should focus on the improvement of social worker wellbeing, in order to retain the social workers we have, and train those we would like to have.

## **Social worker working conditions and psychological health: a longitudinal study**

Social workers play an integral part in the lives of the service users that they work with, who are often among the most vulnerable and/or disadvantaged people in the UK. However, they are also integral to the working of wider society. For example, Stuckler and Basu (2014) suggest that for every one dollar invested into social services there is a three dollar return to the economy through outcomes such as reduced crime rates, higher participation in work and education, and improved health outcomes. Social work is often challenging, operating in contested and risky circumstances. Having a psychologically healthy social work workforce is therefore important (Ravalier, 2019) for the individual social work employees' wellbeing, for sustaining high quality practice, for service users, and the economy and social cohesion of the country more widely.

However, evidence is continually demonstrating that social workers in the UK have poor working conditions, with these conditions impacting their psychological wellbeing. For example, seminal work by Ravalier (2019) showed that social workers are often employed under some of the most difficult working conditions of any occupation in the UK. Similarly, recent research by Ravalier and colleagues (2022a) confirmed that across the world, social workers have continually and chronically poor working conditions, with these conditions having detrimental effects on the wellbeing of social workers and the service users they work with. Further evidence from the United States (Llord et al., 2002), Turkey (Yurur and Sarikaya, 2012), Ireland (Northern Health and Social Care Trust, 2020) and others all suggest that social work is replete with poor working conditions and wellbeing around the world.

This paper outlines the results of a five-year multi-phase longitudinal study of working conditions and wellbeing in the UK social work sector which provides trend data and 'deep dives' into the situation for UK social workers, providing evidence to drive improvement. .

### **Theoretical Background**

The Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model of workplace wellbeing (Demerouti et al., 2001) suggests that negative work-related outcomes such as burnout and stress sickness absence can occur due to the interplay between demands experienced at work and the resources available to employees (Bakker and de Vries, 2021). As such, a role which is replete with high demands and a lack of resources are more likely to lead to negative outcomes for people using services and for staff. Demands are aspects of the workplace which add to the experience of stress. Examples include qualitative workload, which is the difficulty of work, and quantitative workload, which is the sheer volume of work. Resources are argued to buffer against the effects of high demands, with examples including opportunities for personal and professional development, and support from managers and/or peers. Practitioners can experience 'moral distress' (Manttari-van der Kuip, 2016) in situations of persistent under resourcing and inability to meet needs ie. knowing what needs to be done but persistently being helpless to offer meaningful help. However, roles in which there is a balance between demands and resources are more likely to be supportive of positive employee health and wellbeing (e.g. Broetje et al., 2020), sustaining the workforce for the long term (i.e. preventing burnout) and leading to better outcomes for people. This model will provide a platform against which to frame the findings of the current project.

## **Social Work in the UK**

While there are numerous roles within social work, in the UK the majority of these are employed within statutory children's and families and adults' sectors, predominantly in local authority employment. Official UK government statistics (gov.uk, 2022) suggest that there are just over 32,000 children and family social workers in the England, with this number increasing slightly from 2020. However, more children's social workers left the role in 2021 than at any time over the last five years, up 16% compared to 2020, with 6,500 vacancies - the highest number of 5 years, and increasing numbers of agency social workers. Skills for Care (2022) estimate 23,500 adult social workers, with an active vacancy rate of approximately 9.4% and a turnover rate of approximately 14.2%. These statistics suggest therefore that there is a chronic shortage of social workers in the UK.

## **Working Conditions and Stress in Social Work**

The number of social workers leaving social work, and high numbers of vacancies/agency social workers, is perhaps not surprising. The Health and Safety Executive statistics (2021) demonstrate that the social work sector has the second highest levels of stress sickness absence in the UK, significantly higher than the UK average. Chronic workplace stress is defined as a psychological state which lasts over an extended period of time (Ravalier, 2019). Key research by Ravalier (2019) and Ravalier and colleagues (2021) has shown that, across the whole of the social work profession in the UK, working conditions are amongst the worst of all occupations in the country, with these conditions consistently worse among children and family social workers (although remaining poor across other social work roles). These poor conditions were related to chronically poor wellbeing and high levels of stress, and meant that over half of social workers suggested they were aiming to leave the profession.

It is widely understood that persistent stress at work and chronically poor working conditions can have a detrimental effect on the psychological and physiological health and wellbeing of employees. For example, a large meta-review by Niedhammer et al. (2021) consisting of 72 literature reviews published between 2000 and 2020, found significant relationships between high strain job and physiological outcomes such as development of heart disease and stroke, and depression as a psychological outcome. The INTERHEART study by Rosengren et al. (2005) reported a similar relationship between chronically poor psychosocial risk factors and the development of cardiovascular disease in 25,000 respondents across 52 countries. Chandola and colleagues (2006) report the findings of a prospective cohort study involving over 10,300 participants, and again found that chronically poor conditions at work were related to the development of metabolic syndrome, which is a risk factor for conditions such as Type 2 diabetes.

Working conditions are work-related factors which, if left in a negative state over an extended period of time, can lead to poorer employee health, and poorer organisational, outcomes (Cousins et al., 2004). In order to support individuals and organisations in effectively managing and supporting psychosocial workplace hazards, the UK Health and Safety Executive published the management standards approach in 2004. These standards were developed through a review of the literature, and are a set of psychosocial hazards (or working conditions) which, if left in a chronically poor state, can lead to poorer employee health and subsequently impacts on organisational performance. The management

standards specifically state seven working conditions: demands, control, managerial support, peer support, relationships, role, and change.

As noted, as well as impacting individual health outcomes, chronically poor working conditions can also have a knock-on effect on both organisational and (in the case of health care workers and social workers) patient/service user outcomes. One such organisational outcome is employee job satisfaction. Job satisfaction and dissatisfaction have been shown to be related to chronically poor working conditions in occupations such as teachers (Collie et al., 2012), nurses (Hayes et al., 2015), and social workers (Ravalier, 2019). Indeed, Ravalier and colleagues (2021) found over 40% of social workers to be dissatisfied in their jobs, with each of workload, autonomy, support at work, role understanding, and change communication contributing to the experience of job dissatisfaction within the profession. As noted above, in 2021 the children and family social work profession in England had its highest level of turnover in over five years (gov.uk, 2022). While it is often argued that turnover intentions are not representative of actual turnover within any profession, Ravalier (2019) and Ravalier et al. (2021) demonstrated that over 30% of social workers were looking to leave the profession, with demands and support particularly pertinent on this intent. It would seem these intentions are now becoming reality. Social workers are generally engaged well at work, and enjoy making a difference in the lives of service users that they work with (e.g. Ravalier, 2018). However, chronically poor working conditions, sickness absence, turnover, and other individual and organisational outcomes can impact the services provided. For example, in healthcare providers, West and Dawson (2012) demonstrated that better employee engagement led to better morbidity and mortality outcomes for patients. In social work, high turnover means interrupting the relationship between worker and service user, with Flower et al. (2005) finding that children who had more than one social worker were 60% less likely to achieve a permanent placement.

Overall, therefore, stress and working conditions in social work not only have the potential to impact individual employee psychological health and wellbeing, but additional impacts on organisational outcomes. These in turn may impact outcomes for those service users that social workers work so hard to support.

### **Aims and Research Questions**

The primary aim of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate differences in UK-wide social worker working conditions and wellbeing across a five year period. The paper will subsequently outline the working conditions and wellbeing of UK social workers post the final UK Covid-19 lockdown, and determine the effects of working conditions on wellbeing.

## Methods

### Sample and Procedure

This multi-phase cross-sectional project took place between 2017 and 2022. Online survey data collection occurred across three separate periods of time: March 2017 (see Ravalier, 2019), September 2018 (see Ravalier et al., 2021), and December 2021 to April 2022 (this paper). This paper therefore brings together datasets from three independently collected but related data sets looking at working conditions and wellbeing in social work. Data collection for all three were supported by two British social work organisations who subsequently had no influence on the study. In all three, members were sent a bespoke email with an online data collection link and reminder two weeks later, with data collection closing one week after (survey 1 n = 1,333; survey 2 n = 3,421; survey 3 n = 533). All three data collection phases used the same measure of working conditions, perceived stress and demographic measures (see Table 1). Ethical approval was gained from the Bath Spa University Research Ethics Committee.

**Table 1:** Data collection measures across the four surveys

Survey Number (year)	Working Conditions Measure	Wellbeing Measure	Organisational outcome measures	Demographics
1 (2017)	Management Standards Indicator Tool (Edwards and Webster, 2012)	PSS-4	Job Satisfaction Turnover Intentions	Age Gender Role Experience Ethnicity Disability
2 (2018)	Management Standards Indicator Tool (Edwards and Webster, 2012)	PSS-4	Job Satisfaction Turnover Intentions	Age Gender Role Experience
3 (2021/22)	Management Standards Indicator Tool (Edwards and Webster, 2012)	PSS-4	Job Satisfaction Turnover Intentions	Age Gender Role Experience Ethnicity Disability

### Measures

Management Standards Indicator Tool (MSIT; Cousins et al., 2004): This was measured in each of the surveys via the 25-item version of the MSIT. The MSIT is inherently valid and reliable, and has been used to measure working conditions in numerous occupations across the UK and more widely. Participants are asked to respond on a five point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always) for questions 1 through 15, and 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for the remaining 10. Benchmark scoring is available for comparison against UK-wide employment norms, with mean comparison scoring presented in percentiles (Edwards and Webster, 2012). Higher scoring on each measures indicates better working conditions, with Demands and Relationships items scoring reversed.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4; Cohen et al., 1983): The PSS-4 was used as a measure of perceived stress using the short-form four item version of the measure (Cohen et al., 1983). It asks participants to respond on a five-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) how often in the previous month they had experienced certain stressful situations. The measure is heavily validated in a number of different occupational populations across the UK. Higher scores indicate higher levels of stress, with items 2 and 3 reverse scored.

Job satisfaction (Dolbier et al., 2005): Was measured via a single-item global measure. It has been argued that single-item measures of job satisfaction are as reliable as multi-item (and multi-factor) measures, with the added advantage of being quicker and easier to complete. The question asked, therefore, was “Taking everything into account, how do you feel about your job as a whole”, with responses provided on a five point Likert scale from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

Turnover intentions (Ravalier et al., 2021): This was first measured in 2017 (see Ravalier, 2019) as a global measure of intentions to leave the job. However, literature has also differentiated between intentions to leave an occupation completely (i.e. attrition) and intentions to stay within the same career but move to a new employer (i.e. migration). Surveys 2 and 3 therefore also asked about attrition as well as migration. The questions asked, answered on a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ scale were firstly: “Are you considering leaving your current job” (for migration) and “Are you considering leaving the social work profession as a whole” (for attrition).

Demographic data collected across all surveys was: age, gender, social work role, and length of experience. Surveys 1 and 3 also asked whether the respondent described themselves as having a disability and their ethnicity. For survey 3, we also report the findings of one qualitative open-ended question: “In one sentence, what should the priorities be for improvement in social work practice in your country?”

### **Analytical Approach**

Quantitative data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0 (IBM Corp.). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were reported and used to compare 2022 percentile and norm scoring. Multivariate linear regression was then conducted to look at the impact of working conditions on outcome measures in 2022. Finally, a series of ANOVAs were undertaken to look at differences in working conditions and wellbeing outcomes across time, with Bonferoni post-hoc analysis to compare across time on any significant findings in the ANOVA

Qualitative data were analysed using conventional content analysis (CCA; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is a general method used within health research due to its flexibility in analysing textual data. CCA in particular is appropriate here because of the pre-existing theoretical framework, thus allowing the researcher to provide theory-informed rationale behind stressful social work practice. See Hsieh and Shannon (2005) for the CCA procedure carried out.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 sets out the descriptive statistics of participants who responded to each of the three surveys, although the focus here is on Survey 3 (i.e. 2021/22). Survey 1 results can be found at Ravalier (2019), and survey 2 at Ravalier et al. (2021). Respondents' mean age is similar to that in 2017, and again the vast majority of respondents were White British female. Most did not have a disability and worked in Children's services. However, compared with previous surveys, the presented respondents were much less experienced in the role.

**Table 2:** Demographic representation of respondents

	Mean Age (SD)	Gender		Ethnicity		Disability?		Mean Experience	Role	
		Male	Female	White British	Other	Yes	No		Children	Adults
Survey 1 n=1333	45.40 (10.9)	17%	82%	84%	11%	15%	85%	7 years, 8 months	29%	20%
Survey 2 n=3421	40.64 (10.9)	11%	89%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	8-10 years	57%	17%
Survey 3 n=533	45.56 (10.62)	12%	86%	76%	24%	21%	79%	1-3 years	58%	21%

Table 3 outlines findings on job satisfaction, intentions to leave the current social work role, and intentions to leave the profession as a whole. In the latest survey, over half (52%) of respondents suggested that they were either extremely or slightly dissatisfied in their role. This also equates to just under 4 in 10 social workers (38.2%) being satisfied in their roles. This is a lower proportion than in 2018, but many more respondents than were dissatisfied in 2017. A similar percentage of social workers were also looking to leave their current role, but stay in social work as in 2018 (60.9% as opposed to 60.5%), but the mean length of time they were looking to stay in the role was much lower at 9 months than either 2017 or 2018. Finally, while intentions to leave social work altogether were not asked in 2017, again similar numbers of social work respondents are looking to leave the role in 2021 (36%) to 2018 (37%), and aiming to do so in a similar length of time (14 months in 2021 versus 12 months).

**Table 3:** Satisfaction, migration and attrition across the three surveys

	Job (Dis)Satisfaction			Total dissatisfaction (%)	Migration (%)	Migration Length	Attrition (%)	Attrition Length
	Slightly (%)	Extremely (%)	Neither					
Survey 1	20.0%	19.7%	–	39.7%	52.0%	14.5 months	–	–
Survey 2	–	–	–	58.1%	60.5%	20 months	37.6%	11 months
Survey 3	25.8%	26.0%	10.0%	51.8%	60.9%	9 months	36.2%	1 year, 2 months

## Working Conditions and Wellbeing

Table 4 outlines mean, standard deviation, and percentile scoring on each of the working conditions measures for each year the survey has been conducted, as well as broken down by the two most populous job roles (Children and Family social workers, and Adult's social workers). A more detailed breakdown of mean scoring for 2018 (Ravalier, 2019) and 2019 (Ravalier et al., 2021) can be found in previous papers. In 2022, across all respondents, scoring was at a maximum of the 25th percentile (according to Edwards and Webster, 2012). This demonstrates scoring which is worse than up to 75% of those in the benchmark sample. Scores were similar across Children and Family and Adult's social workers, although Managerial Support, Peer Support, and Role all scored more highly among Adult's social workers. Perceived stress mean scoring in 2020 was 8.18 (SD 2.80), higher than in both 2018 (7.44, SD 3.14) and 2020 (8.04, SD 3.11).

**Table 4:** Mean working conditions scoring for 2018, 2020, and 2022 respondents and separated by job role

	Year	Demands (SD)	Control (SD)	Managerial Support (SD)	Peer Support (SD)	Relationships (SD)	Role (SD)	Change (SD)
All respondents <i>Percentile</i>	2022 n=540	2.38 (.88) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.03 (.86) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.28 (.99) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.69 (.76) 25 <sup>th</sup>	4.24 (.93) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.86 (.82) 10 <sup>th</sup>	2.54 (.90) <5 <sup>th</sup>
	2018* n=3421	2.29 (.83) <5 <sup>th</sup>	2.96 (.82) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.18 (.93) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.77 (.72) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.81 (.89) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.72 (.81) <5 <sup>th</sup>	2.44 (.85) <5 <sup>th</sup>
	2017** n=1333	2.47 (.88) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.11 (.85) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.25 (.95) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.71 (.76) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.91 (.92) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.85 (.80) 10 <sup>th</sup>	2.52 (.86) <5 <sup>th</sup>
Children's Social Workers <i>Percentile</i>	2022 n=279	2.39 (.86) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.00 (.89) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.19 (1.00) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.64 (.80) 10 <sup>th</sup>	4.21 (.96) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.81 (.85) 5 <sup>th</sup>	2.53 (.91) <5 <sup>th</sup>
	2018* n=1953	2.11 (.77) <5 <sup>th</sup>	2.87 (.78) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.19 (.92) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.78 (.69) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.76 (.88) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.74 (.79) 5 <sup>th</sup>	2.43 (.83) <5 <sup>th</sup>
	2017** n=385	2.18 (.81) <5 <sup>th</sup>	2.94 (.81) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.24 (.94) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.72 (.76) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.86 (.92) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.85 (.78) 10 <sup>th</sup>	2.42 (.83) <5 <sup>th</sup>
Adult's Social Workers <i>Percentile</i>	2022 n=99	2.44 (.93) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.06 (.79) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.49 (.90) 50 <sup>th</sup>	3.74 (.70) 25 <sup>th</sup>	4.27 (.92) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.90 (.77) 10 <sup>th</sup>	2.53 (.85) <5 <sup>th</sup>
	2018* n=586	2.52 (.84) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.02 (.79) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.15 (.93) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.85 (.71) 50 <sup>th</sup>	3.90 (.88) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.62 (.81) <5 <sup>th</sup>	2.36 (.87) <5 <sup>th</sup>
	2017** n=262	2.52 (.85) <5 <sup>th</sup>	3.15 (.85) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.21 (1.01) 10 <sup>th</sup>	3.72 (.78) 25 <sup>th</sup>	3.88 (.86) 5 <sup>th</sup>	3.66 (.83) 10 <sup>th</sup>	2.47 (.88) <5 <sup>th</sup>

\*Also available at: Ravalier et al. (2021)

\*\*Also available at: Ravalier (2019)

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether there are statistical differences in working conditions scoring across the three time points of this paper. Post-hoc Bonferoni analysis was also used to compare mean scoring across time, and determine whether these differences were statistically significant. Significant differences were found across time between five of the seven working conditions (no significant differences across time on managerial support or peer support).

Significant differences were found in the Demands variable between 2022 and 2020 ( $F(2, 5121)=21.66, p<.05$ ), with higher scoring in 2022 indicating better workload. However, lower scoring in 2020 shows that Demands worsened between early 2017 and late 2018 ( $F(2, 5121)=21.66, p<.001$ ). Scoring on the Control factors was significantly worse in 2020 than it was in 2018 ( $F(2, 5151)=14.05, p<.001$ ), again demonstrating worsened scoring between 2017 and 2018, and thus a reduction in autonomy at work. The Relationships variable showed significant differences between 2022 and 2020 ( $F(2, 5122)=51.41, p<.001$ ), with scoring improving across time. Significant differences between 2020 and 2018 ( $F(2, 2155)=51.41, p<.005$ ) are again indicative of worsened scoring, with Relationships improving significantly between 2018 and 2022 ( $F(2, 5122)=51.41, p<.001$ ). The Role variable demonstrated significantly poorer scoring between 2018 and 2020 ( $F(2, 5118)=17.52, p<.001$ ), with scoring then returning to 2017 levels in 2022 ( $F(2, 5118)=17.52, p<.001$ ). The same trend was found with the Change factor, which got worse between 2018 and 2020 ( $F(2, 5116)=7.74, p<.005$ ), while recovering again in 2022 ( $F(2, 5116)=7.74, p<.05$ ).

**Table 5:** Regression analyses of the influence of working conditions on perceived stress in 2022 respondents.

	Significantly related factors	Coefficient Estimates	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	R2	Adjusted R2
Perceived stress	Demands	-1.24	-8.65	<.001	.29	.28
	Role	-.45	-2.91	<.005		

A regression analysis (see Table 5) was also undertaken to look at the impact of working conditions of perceived stress in the 2022 respondents. The model proved a good fit ( $p<.01$ ), accounting for 28% of the variance in the model. Two of the seven working conditions significantly impacted perceived stress: Demands and Role. The five remaining factors were all non-significant. For all factors included in the model, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was less than 10 and Tolerance above 0.2, indicating no colinearity (Field, 2013).

### Qualitative Analysis

Content analysis was conducted in order to analyse open-ended responses to the question “in one sentence, what should be the priorities for improvement in social work practice be in your country?” from the 2021/22 survey. While answering the question was not mandatory, 498 individuals provided open-ended responses to this question, with many of these responses including more than one suggestion. Following analysis, 780 separate suggestions were made, with these boiled down to 23 individual codes. However, the majority of these individual codes fit into one of five individual themes.

**Table 6:** Hierarchical results of the content analysis into priorities for improvement in social work practice in the UK.

Main Theme	No. of Mentions	Underlying Codes	Description
Workload	2709	Caseloads	A combination of high caseloads, retention and

		Workforce	recruitment issues, and generally high workload.
		Workload	
Resources	94	–	Resources available for service users
Pay	84	Amount of pay	Reflections on the level of remuneration in the role.
		Parity of pay	
Respect	81	–	Greater respect for the profession from all areas of society.
Reflection	79	–	A request for systematic, targeted, and developmental reflective supervision.

The most frequently discussed theme, workload, related to the qualitative and quantitative make up of work expected of social workers. The theme is served by three underlying codes. Firstly, caseloads relate to the number and complexity of cases. In particular, respondents wanted support in the way that cases are allocated, as well as a reduction in the number and complexity of cases expected. “Smaller caseloads with legally imposed maximum caseload” (Respondent 22); “Lower caseloads to allow us to do our jobs properly and with the time and dedication it deserves” (Respondent 143), and “lower caseloads to allow a more person centred approach, relationship building and time to be able to properly listen and support our service users” (Respondent 30). Secondly, respondents suggested that more social workers are needed to allow social workers to practice their job to the best of their abilities, and thus ensure better outcomes for service users. For example, Respondent 9 suggested “More money provided to local authorities to employ more social worker”, and Respondent 297 “More staff to lower case loads taking in consideration complexity of cases in order to be able to complete tasks to a high standard”. Finally, respondents spoke of the need to improve the workload more generally in order to reduce the broader workload expected within the role. As such, in addition to having “enough time to do quality work” (Respondent 3); participants also frequently discussed wanting less repetitive paperwork “reduce duplication of paperwork to suit OFSTED [Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills], and actually have more time with families directly” (Respondent 372), and a general “decrease in administration” (Respondent 401).

There is also overlap in some comments within some of the codes which make up this theme. For example, respondent 7 suggested that “In front line children service teams, at least double the amount of social workers are needed in order to manage caseloads efficiently. If good social work is to take place this number would need to be high again.”, and respondent 412 “Manageable caseloads so that we have the time to dedicate to each child or adult we work with”.

The second most populous response was a request for greater resources to be able to allocate to the service users that social workers work with. In particular, there is a recognition that social workers at times cannot do the job to their fullest, and therefore service users

may be negatively impacted, because of the lack of resources that are available to offer. Respondent 226: "I don't think SW practice can be separated from the overwhelming issue of poverty and cuts in LA resources. We need more public provision"; Respondent 501: "It is failing the people we work with social workers want to do a good job but lack of resources make it impossible".

Level of remuneration was the next most frequently discussed theme, and there were generally two reflections: the basic level of remuneration offered to social workers in the UK, and parity of pay with other similar roles. Firstly, social workers wanted an increased level of basic pay while also being remunerated for the extra hours that they inevitably have to put in to successfully achieve within their role which would also improve both retention and recruitment of social workers. Respondent 98 suggested "Pay that reflects additional hours worked, flexi scheme doesn't work if you don't have the time to take overworked hours back", Respondent 129: "Pay and benefits that matches the level of difficulty and stress related to the job", and Respondent 234 "Paying more money to permanent staff as opposed to agency workers which would motivate more people to work permanently without high staff turnovers." Participants also wanted parity of pay with other professions, roles, and employers: Respondent 203: "Fair pay and being well supported on a wider scale, such as wider government, members of the the public"; Respondent 400: "Pay and conditions parity with NHS health professionals."

Respondents also wanted an acknowledgement from all levels of society as to the importance and difficulty of the role that they do, as well as a broader understanding of the emotional impacts of doing social work. Respondent 111 suggested it is important to "ensure the professionalism and experience is recognised, on a par with other professionals and stop the individual blame game, listen to the clients", and Respondent 237 that organisational employers should "treat SWs as professionals, respect their time and time needed to do their job". Finally, Respondent 501: "Recognition of the risk and trauma that social workers are continually exposed to"

The final theme to develop through the data was the recognition of the role of reflective supervision in the social work role. In particular, it was suggested that supervision can sometimes be a tick-box exercise, done to ensure case progression rather than practice improvement or individual development "Emotional non supervisory support and less emphasis on just focusing on targets to meet and OFSTED visit and less bullying to achieve this" (Respondent 72). Furthermore, others wanted reflective supervision that is not provided solely by managers who often are not social work trained themselves, but rather by trained professionals who may support development more fully, "actual reflective supervision by trained professionals not team managers" (Respondent 270).

## Discussion

The aims of this paper were two-fold: first to present the latest working conditions in social work findings, and secondly to determine whether or not working conditions have changed across the previous five or so years. Social workers have consistently been shown to have chronically poor working conditions (e.g. Ravalier, 2019; Ravalier et al., 2021). In the latest iteration of this survey, mean scoring on the Management Standards Indicator Tool, the measure of psychosocial working conditions used within this paper, was still consistently poor. Indeed, each of the demands, control, and change sub-factors scored at the 5th percentile or lower - worse than 95% benchmark respondents in other organisations. Managerial Support and understanding of the Role played scored in the 10th percentile, and Peer Support and Relationships slightly better in the 25th percentile, although still worse than 75% of benchmark scores. These scores therefore reflect the ongoing chronically poor working conditions. Again reflecting previous findings, Children and Family social workers scored worse than Adult's social workers on Managerial Support, Peer Support, and Role (Ravalier et al., 2021). We also found that, in the 2021/22 survey, levels of job dissatisfaction, intentions to leave the current job, and intentions to leave social work were all relatively high. As such, over 50% of respondents were dissatisfied with their role, six in ten were looking to leave their role, and over 35% were looking to leave social work altogether. These findings are stark, with the potential implications not only for colleagues' wellbeing but also outcomes for service users. As noted, the children's social work sector in England has the highest level of turnover in at least 5 years, as well as the highest number of vacancies in a similar time period (gov.uk, 2022), and the presented findings suggest that these trends may continue in the coming years without adequate improvement in working conditions and pay.

Findings from regression analysis demonstrated that the demands and role working conditions measured via the MSIT were the two factors significantly impacting upon individual wellbeing, similar to that found in previous studies (e.g. Ravalier, 2019; Ravalier et al., 2022). Qualitative content analysis mirrored some of these findings. In particular, the MSIT demonstrated that excessive demands were mostly impactful on wellbeing, and content analysis found that three types of demand were described most frequently as requiring improvement in UK social work. In particular, these were: having both high numbers and excessively qualitative demanding caseloads, workload issues such as repetitive administrative tasks, and workforce issues such as a lack of retention and recruitment of social workers. The second significantly impactful working condition on wellbeing was that of role, and in particular respondents' understanding of their role within their organisations. Within the qualitative findings, this most closely relates to the Resources qualitative finding. In particular, if social workers cannot provide adequate support and resources for their service users, they may begin to question their role within the organisation and the sector as a whole.

However, there are a number of areas for improvement in social work practice which emerged from the qualitative findings which were not represented in the quantitative. Firstly, respondents wanted to be paid a wage which was both reflective of the importance of their role as well as being on a par with colleagues working similarly important roles. It is important to note that this is the first time this finding has emerged from research into social worker working conditions and wellbeing (e.g. Ravalier, 2019; Ravalier et al., 2021), and is

potentially reflective of continuingly low pay awards across the last decade - potentially the lowest of all occupations in the UK (Weale, 2022). Secondly, respondents wanted greater respect - from government, employers, service users, and the public in general, for the role that they do. This is at the heart of public campaigns such as that from the British Association of Social Workers and Social Workers Union (BASW, 2019). Finally, respondents wanted reflective supervision which was meaningful, supportive, and developmental, rather than being a 'tick box' exercise. A recent review has demonstrated that while good and systematic reflective supervision may be impactful for both social worker and service user outcomes such as mental health and wellbeing, often reflective supervision can be 'piecemeal' and lacks support (Ravalier et al., 2022).

The second aim of this paper was to compare working conditions across time by comparing mean scoring on psychosocial working conditions at each time point. While each of Managerial Support and Peer Support showed no significant changes across time, there was otherwise a general trend. In particular, across the remaining five factors, scoring worsened significantly between 2017 and 2018, while recovering to at least near 2017 levels in the latest 2021/22 survey. This suggests that while working conditions worsened significantly between 2017 and 2018, they got significantly better again in 2021/22. Despite this, as outlined above, working conditions were still poorer than the majority of other occupations (Edwards and Webster, 2012). As such, each of qualitative and quantitative demands, the amount of autonomy individuals have over the way in which they do their jobs, relationships, understanding of their role within the organisation, and how change is communicated within the organisation followed this pattern. Therefore, despite there being better findings in 2021/22 than in 2018, these working conditions were still much worse than benchmark occupations and organisations.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has a number of strengths and limitations which need to be mentioned. Firstly, it is the first study of its kind to look at working conditions over a longitudinal period, while also allowing social workers to expand upon their own perceptions as to how their role can be improved. We also provide important context as to why social work has a problem with recruitment and retention, as well as high levels of stress and mental health-related sickness absence. This paper also used valid and reliable quantitative measures throughout, with quantitative and qualitative findings triangulating to provide a greater depth of understanding. However, the study was cross-sectional in nature with particularly low numbers of responses in the latest survey especially in comparison with its predecessors. Also, response rates are not possible to ascertain due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, making generalisability across the whole of the UK social work population troublesome. There is also a discrepancy in the collection of demographic data within the 2019 survey, making comparison across all three time points more difficult. Furthermore, while internet-mediated data collections methodologies can aid in the collection of large amounts of data from both heterogeneous and homogeneous samples, it does make sample size estimations and response rate estimates impossible to determine.

### **Implications and Future Research**

As noted above, it has been clear that there is a trend in social workers leaving the profession and too few being recruited. Studies published in (Ravalier) 2019 and (Ravalier et al.,) 2021 demonstrated similarly high turnover intentions, with the warning that these may

translate into actual turnover. The presented findings from the latest survey suggest that these trends are to continue - high demands caused by workforce issues and workload, combined with low resources available both for service users and social workers themselves - are likely to see continued pressures on turnover and recruitment. There therefore needs to be intervention at a political, governmental, and employer level to support recruitment and retention. We are also seeing ongoing high levels of stress sickness absence (Health and Safety Executive, 2021) as well as high levels of perceived stress. Further intervention is therefore needed from academics and employers to support stress-buffering mechanisms such as the provision of peer support, and approaches to support the workload of social workers. We also suggest that, while interventions may begin to be put in place, that robust evaluation of these interventions is required. Finally, it would appear that studies demonstrating ongoing poor working conditions in social work predict real-world outcomes, and therefore the ongoing measuring and supporting of working conditions in social work is important to detect changes.

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